

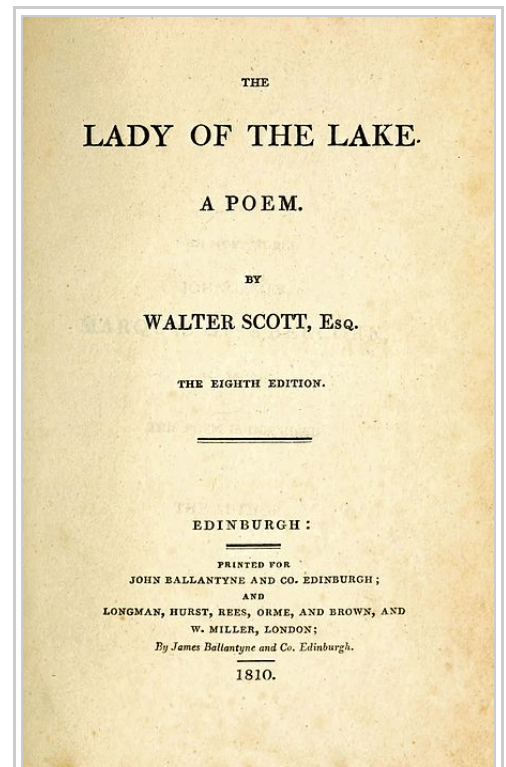
# *The Lady of the Lake* (poem)

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*The Lady of the Lake* is a narrative poem by Sir Walter Scott, first published in 1810. Set in the Trossachs region of Scotland, it is composed of six cantos, each of which concerns the action of a single day.<sup>[1]</sup> The poem has three main plots: the contest among three men, Roderick Dhu, James Fitz-James, and Malcolm Graeme, to win the love of Ellen Douglas; the feud and reconciliation of King James V of Scotland and James Douglas; and a war between the lowland Scots (led by James V) and the highland clans (led by Roderick Dhu of Clan Alpine). The poem was tremendously influential in the nineteenth century, and inspired the Highland Revival.

By the late nineteenth century, however, the poem was much less popular. (It continued, however, to be a standard reading in elementary schools until the early twentieth century.<sup>[2]</sup>) Its influence is indirect: Schubert's *Ellens Dritter Gesang* (later adapted to use the full lyrics of the Latin Ave Maria), Rossini's *La Donna del Lago* (1819), the Ku Klux Klan custom of cross burning, the last name of U.S. abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and the song "Hail to the Chief", were all inspired by the poem.

It shares its name with the Arthurian character, the Lady of the Lake. Other allusions to the legend are scant.



Title page to the eighth edition, 1810

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## Characters

- King James V of Scotland travelling incognito *as* James Fitz-James, the Knight of Snowdown
- Ellen Douglas, daughter of James Douglas
- James Douglas, once the Earl of Bothwell, the mentor of the youthful King James, now exiled as an enemy
- Allan Bane, a bard
- Roderick Dhu, the chief of Clan Alpine, outlawed after committing a cold-blooded homicide at the Scottish court
- Lady Margaret, the mother of Roderick Dhu
- Malcolm Graeme, a young highland chief and former courtier of King James, loved by Ellen
- Brian the Hermit, a pagan prophet in the Druid tradition
- Duncan, a leading member of Clan Alpine who has just died
- Angus, the son of Duncan
- Norman, a bridegroom and member of Clan Alpine
- Mary, Norman's bride
- Blanche of Devan, a lowland Scottish woman, whose bridegroom was murdered on her wedding day by the men of Clan Alpine, causing Blanche to lose her reason

## Narrative

### Canto I: The Chase

The poem begins with a rapid-moving hunt, chasing a stag in the forests of the Trossachs. The stag outruns the hunt, exhausting all its members until only one huntsman -- who, we later learn, is James Fitz-James -- follows it until his horse falls down dead of exhaustion.

The huntsman blows his horn to try to contact someone, and wanders to the shore of Loch Katrine where a young woman, Ellen Douglas, rows across and picks him up in a skiff. He is then taken to a house, which he suspects is a concealed hide-out of a Highland chief. There he is given dinner by Ellen, the bard Allan Bane, and Lady Margaret, and a bed for the night. That night he dreams of Ellen, only to see her face suddenly change to that of his exiled enemy, James Douglas – leading him to suspect that Ellen and James Douglas are related.



1879 painting of Ellen's Isle

### Canto II: The Island

Since the poem will only work if James Douglas and James Fitz-James do not encounter each other until the sixth canto, this canto has a number of comings and goings. James Fitz-James departs the island first thing in the morning. Ellen and Allan Bane discuss Roderick Dhu, Malcolm Graeme, and James Fitz-James, agreeing that the first is bloodthirsty and homicidal, but the only person who would defend James Douglas, and that James Fitz-James is an attractive person, but may be a secret foe of their kinspeople. Roderick Dhu, James

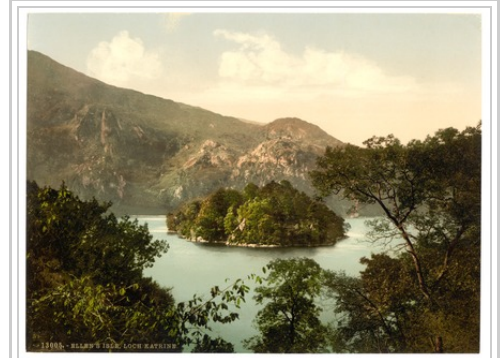
Douglas, and Malcolm Graeme return to the island. As Clan Alpine escorts Roderick Dhu to the island, they sing the boat song, "Hail to the Chief". Roderick Dhu asks Douglas for Ellen's hand in marriage, to conclude an alliance between Douglas and Clan Alpine, which can be the basis of a Highland uprising against King James. James Douglas refuses, partly because he will not force Ellen into a loveless marriage, partly also because he remains, despite all the injuries he has suffered, loyal to King James. Roderick Dhu and Malcolm Graeme quarrel over Ellen, and are about to draw their swords against each other, but James Douglas declares that the first to draw will be his foe. James Douglas also says that it is an insult for an exile for his daughter to be the spoil of a battle between two chiefs. Roderick Dhu tells Graeme to leave his territory, which Graeme does, refusing even to borrow a boat; Graeme instead swims across Loch Katrine to the shore.

### Canto III: The Gathering

Despite James Douglas' refusal to participate in the uprising, Roderick Dhu decides to commence the rebellion anyway. With a pagan prophet, Brian the Hermit, Roderick fashions and sets alight the fiery cross, and hands it to his henchman, Malise, to summon the members of the clan to war. The members of the clan drop everything they are doing to respond to the summons of their chief, whether it be a funeral (Angus at the funeral of his father, Duncan) or a wedding (Norman and Mary). Malise runs around the countryside, finally passing the burning cross on to Angus, the son of Duncan, a leading member of the clan who has just died; and Angus, in his turn, passes the summons on to Norman, a bridegroom, interrupting Norman's wedding. James Douglas flees the island for a hermit's cave so that he will not be associated with the Clan Alpine uprising. As Roderick Dhu is about to leave the island, he overhears Ellen praying to the Virgin, singing "Ave Maria." Roderick Dhu sadly realizes that this is the last time he will ever hear Ellen's voice, and then prepares to go off to battle.



*A Scene from 'The Lady of the Lake'*  
(1849), by Alexander Johnston



Ellen's Isle (An t-Eilean Molach)  
photographed in the 1890s

### Canto IV: The Prophecy

Malise and Norman discuss the upcoming battle. Roderick Dhu has decided that the women and old men should take shelter on the island in the middle of Loch Katrine. When Norman asks why Roderick is staying apart from the main body of the troops, Malise says it is the result of a prophecy made by Brian the Hermit.

Roderick Dhu had consulted Brian as to what will be the outcome of the battle. To determine this, they sacrifice one of the finest animals that the clan had received from one of its cattle raids, a milk-white bull. Brian prophesied,

"Which spills the foremost foeman's life, that party conquers in the strife"  
— lines 2524-25

Roderick Dhu asks if any of the local friendly clans will fight on Clan Alpine's side; when he hears that none will, he sheds a tear, but at once masters himself and says that Clan Alpine shall fight in Trossachs glen. Ellen, meanwhile, is worrying about the fate of her father, who stated that they would meet in Heaven

next if they met nowhere else. Allan Bane seeks to distract her by singing the ballad of Alice Brand. When the ballad ends, James Fitz-James appears. He has asked a guide, Murdoch, to bring him back to Loch Katrine. There he pleads with Ellen to leave the highlands and elope with him. Ellen says she cannot marry him; first, she is the daughter of an outlaw; second, her heart is promised to another. James Fitz-James is disappointed, but before he leaves he gives her a ring, saying that if she needs anything from the King of Scotland, she has but to present the ring and it will bring her to him and he will grant her wish. Murdoch guides James Fitz-James further, when they encounter Blanche of Devan. Blanche's bridegroom was slain by Clan Alpine on her wedding day, whereupon she lost her reason. Blanche sings a song of hunting, to warn James Fitz-James that Murdoch and the other Clan Alpine men plan to trap and murder him. James Fitz-James then draws his sword; Murdoch shoots off an arrow, which misses James Fitz-James, but hits Blanche, killing her. James Fitz-James then pursues Murdoch and stabs him to death. He returns to Blanche, who warns him of the ambush. Blanche has been wearing a lock of her bridegroom's hair ever since his murder. Blanche dies. James Fitz-James cuts off a lock of Blanche's hair, mingles it amidst the hair of her bridegroom, and imbrues it in her blood, promising to imbrue the lock in the blood of Roderick Dhu. He then plans to make his way out of the trap in the highlands by walking out by night. He succeeds in doing this until he turns a rock and suddenly comes upon a mountaineer sitting by a fire. The warrior challenges him, and James Fitz-James says he is not a friend to Roderick Dhu. However, the two men recognize each other as worthy warriors, the warrior shares his dinner with James Fitz-James, and the two go to sleep side by side.

## Canto V: The Combat

Dawn breaks, and the two men start off for the border. They begin to argue about the relations between Highlanders and Lowlanders; Fitz-James condemns the clans' thefts and feuds, while his guide responds by referring to the many appropriations and legalized crimes of the Lowlanders. Finally, James Fitz-James declares that if he ever encountered the chieftain he would revenge himself in full. On this, the mountaineer whistles, and five hundred men stand up from their hiding places; the mountaineer reveals that *he* is Roderick Dhu. Wishing to have this combat all to himself, he dismisses the men who were waiting to ambush.

On arriving at the border, they begin to fight, the chieftain scorning to settle their differences any other way. Though Roderick is stronger, he is less skilful, and is badly wounded; when Fitz-James stops to address him, the chieftain defiantly seizes him by the throat; but he has lost too much blood, and his strength fails him. Fitz-James wins after a long struggle, and with his bugle summons medical aid for Roderick Dhu before setting off for Stirling, where a festival is taking place.

As he approaches the castle, he sees Douglas in the distance. Douglas has come to surrender himself in order to save Roderick and Malcolm Graeme; but before doing so, he stops to participate in the games of the festival. He wins so many events that he is brought to meet the king, but the king, giving him the purse of prize-money, will not acknowledge him as an acquaintance. Provoked, Douglas names himself, and is immediately seized.

A messenger rushes up to announce that the Earl of Mar is about to begin battle against Roderick Dhu, and he is ordered to return with the news that both Roderick and Douglas have been captured and that no battle is needed.

## Canto VI: The Guard-Room

The next morning, Ellen and Allan Bane enter the guard-room at Stirling Castle, hoping to visit Douglas in prison. Ellen is taken to a furnished room upstairs to wait; Allan Bane is shown to the cell of the gravely injured Roderick Dhu, who dies as Allan sings him one last song. Meanwhile, leaning out of the window, Ellen is startled and heartbroken to hear the voice of Malcolm Graeme, singing in one of the turrets. Soon afterwards Fitz-James arrives to tell her that it is time for her audience with the king.

Ellen enters the room and looks around for King James. To her surprise, every man has doffed his hat except for James Fitz-James, and she realises that James Fitz-James is the King himself.

Terrified, Ellen collapses, but the king lifts her up and reassures her that her father has been pardoned, and asks whom else she would like released. Her generous first thought is of Roderick Dhu, but James tells her that he has died. Ellen is about to ask for Malcolm, but cannot speak; divining her wish, the king jokingly orders that Malcolm be put in fetters, and after putting a gold chain around the man's neck, gives the clasp to Ellen.

## Sources

The poem is not based upon specific historic events, but has certain elements that occurred in Scottish history:

- In myth, King James V of Scotland was reputed to travel anonymously among his subjects.
- Several kings of Scotland quarrelled with the Douglas dynasty.
- Clan Alpine is a very old Highland clan in re-establishment, whom many clans claim descendant from, e.g. the MacGregors. They represent the Highland people and their power-struggle with the Scots monarchy.

## Influences

The influences of the poem, *The Lady of the Lake*, are both extensive and diverse, given that both the last name taken by the leading African-American abolitionist, Frederick Douglass,<sup>[3]</sup> and the Ku Klux Klan custom of cross burning derive from the influence of the poem (through the film *Birth of a Nation*.) But, the Fiery cross or *Crann Tara* was a device for rallying people in Scotland and did not carry racist connotations.

### Rossini's *La Donna del Lago*

Gioachino Rossini composed an opera, *La Donna del Lago*, based on the poem. The opera downplays the other plots in favor of the love story. In the opera, James Douglas tells Ellen that she must marry Roderick Dhu. Some of the characters' names are changed slightly: Roderick Dhu becomes Rodrigo, Ellen becomes Elena, and James Fitz-James becomes Uberto.

### Schubert's *Sieben Gesänge aus Walter Scotts "Fräulein am See"*

Walter Scott's poem, in the German translation by Adam Storck, was set to music by Franz Schubert in his work entitled *Sieben Gesänge aus Walter Scotts "Fräulein am See"* (Seven songs from Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*). This includes the three "Ellen songs": "Ellens Gesang I",<sup>[4]</sup> "Ellens Gesang II",<sup>[5]</sup> and "Ellens Gesang III."<sup>[6]</sup> Owing to its opening words, "Ave Maria", *Ellens Gesang III* is sometimes also referred to as

"Schubert's Ave Maria". However, the music has become more famous in a later adaptation that replaced the Scott/Storck text with the Latin text of the Catholic "Ave Maria" ("Hail Mary") prayer. Other songs from the poem set by Schubert are "The Boat-Song" beginning with the famous lines "Hail to the Chief", a mourning song sung for Duncan, "Coronach", "Normans Gesang", sung by Norman to Mary when he learns that he must join the Clan-Alpine Muster, and finally "Lied des gefangenen Jägers", (Lay of the imprisoned huntsman) sung by Malcolm Graeme, the betrothed of Ellen Douglas, while captive in Stirling Castle. "Boot Gesang" and "Coronach" are choral pieces, and as the other songs in the cycle are for solo voice, complete performances of the cycle are thus very rare.

## Cross burning

In the third canto of the poem, a burnt cross is used to summon Clan Alpine to rise against King James. This method of rallying supporters and publicizing their attacks was adapted by the second Ku Klux Klan in 1915 after the film, *The Birth of a Nation*. The Ku Klux Klan used cross burning for dramatic terror as a racist tactic.

*And while the Fiery Cross glanced, like a meteor, round.*

The Chieftain killed a goat, made a cross of light wood, lit the four ends on fire, and extinguished the flames with the sacrifice of the goat's blood. The cross was carried to the first village by a messenger who spoke one word; the place to meet. The village would send a messenger with the cross to the next village and relay the same message.

Any man between the ages of 16 and 60 able to bear arms who failed to arrive at the appointed tryst in full battle gear met the same fate as the goat and cross - himself slain and his chattels burnt.<sup>[7]</sup>

## The last name of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass took his last name from the poem. When Douglass escaped from slavery, he changed his last name to hide from his former master. A friend proposed a new one:

“ I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of "Frederick." I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity. Mr. Johnson had just been reading the *Lady of the Lake*, and at once suggested that my name be "Douglass." ”

## Ellen Douglas Birdseye Wheaton

Ellen Douglas Birdseye Wheaton (1816–1858), author of *The Diary of Ellen Birdseye Wheaton* (1923, privately printed, Boston), wife of the abolitionist Charles Augustus Wheaton (1809–1882), was named for the Scott heroine by her parents.

## *Classics Illustrated* edition

In September 1950, the comic-book publisher, Gilberton Company, Inc., of New York City, issued *Classics Illustrated* number 75, "The Lady of the Lake". It was illustrated by Henry C. Kiefer, one of Gilberton's best graphic artists for the comic-book genre. The editor was Helene Lecar, who transformed the cantos into a

concise narrative that would be interesting to school-age children. It has 44 pages devoted to the story by Sir Walter Scott, plus one page of biography of Sir Walter. *Classics Illustrated* number 75 originally sold for 15 cents, and tens of thousands of copies were printed on cheap newsprint. It remains a collector's item more than six decades later, and is widely sold in used comic-book stores.

## Film adaptation

In 1928 the poem served as the basis for a silent film *The Lady of the Lake* directed by James A. FitzPatrick and starring Percy Marmont and Benita Hume. It was made at Islington Studios by Gainsborough Pictures.

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- Ellens Gesang III (<http://www.greatscores.com/p/song/sheetmusic/1004045>)
- The Poems and Plays of Sir Walter Scott*, Volume 2, JM Dent & Sons, Ltd, E.P. Dutton & Co., Everyman Flatback 1906-1920 p505

## External links

- e-text (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/3011>) at Project Gutenberg
- The Lady of the Lake* at Archive.org (<https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Scott%2C%20Walter%2C%20Sir%2C%201771-1832%22%20AND%20%28lady%20lake%29>)
- The Lady of the Lake* ([https://librivox.org/search?title=The+Lady+of+the+Lake&author=SCOTT&reader=&keywords=&genre\\_id=0&status=all&project\\_type=either&recorded\\_language=&sort\\_order=catalog\\_date&search\\_page=1&search\\_form=advanced](https://librivox.org/search?title=The+Lady+of+the+Lake&author=SCOTT&reader=&keywords=&genre_id=0&status=all&project_type=either&recorded_language=&sort_order=catalog_date&search_page=1&search_form=advanced)) public domain audiobook at LibriVox



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